

Mentoring

“Successful people turn everyone who can help them into sometime mentors.”

– John Crosby

I remember early on in my actuarial career, I was very despondent. Having just failed my third consecutive exam, and without a single pass, I was contemplating whether I should pursue another career. While standing at the lift well in the old National Mutual Building, one of the qualified actuaries asked me how I was going. When I shared my dilemma, she responded “Andrew, what was really helpful when I was struggling with exams was to remind myself that I was no better or worse than any of the other students – You are no better or worse than other students: just back yourself.”

That expression of support and encouragement made an extraordinary difference to how I felt, and to the determination I took in continuing on with the exams. This was over twenty years ago (yes, I was oh so very young when I started studying), and I still remember that as if it was today. My bet is that at some stage in your career, whether at moments of great difficulty, in times of transition or the daily routine of working life, there have been people who have heavily influenced and shaped who you are today.

To explore this further, take a couple of minutes now to reflect back on the best manager, mentor, coach or role model you have ever had. What was it about that person that made the experience with them so meaningful? Which of their behaviours did you most admire? How did they support you, develop you or challenge you to grow? How did that make you feel?

WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

Having worked across quite a few disciplines and areas, my sense is that relative to many professions, actuaries are extraordinarily giving with their time and commitment to supporting the development of their people. When I have asked actuarial professionals why this may be so, the general consensus is that given the demanding nature of sitting the exams and qualifying, the gratitude that goes with qualifying and the rewards that are reaped, many people want to make a contribution to their colleagues. Many qualified actuaries say they couldn't have qualified without other's support, so they are simply giving back what they have received. In my May column, I touched on this with Joseph Campbell's work and the hero's journey. When the hero climbs the mountain and achieves their goal, they bring gifts and wisdom from the journey back into their communities.

So what kind of developmental relationships may be helpful for you, in whatever stage you are in of your career? What are the gifts of support and contribution you have to offer the profession?

THE MENTOR RELATIONSHIP

One of the best ways to develop your leadership capability is to find a mentor – choose someone who will stretch you, who has had different experiences, different challenges, perhaps different thinking preferences or strengths to you. Ask them to take you beyond a comfortable conversation; drink up every last



drop of their insight. One of the key challenges mentoring programs often face is that after the third or fourth conversation, the mentor and mentee run out of things to say or do and the relationship degenerates into polite coffee followed by “too busy to meet” and finally both parties conveniently ignoring that the relationship ever took place. The way to ensure this doesn't happen is be clear on what you want to get out of the relationship and hold each other accountable to achieve that. Be respectfully frank if you think the relationship has run its course; this will save both you and the mentor valuable time.

Many people who excel at developmental relationships network widely; the biggest steps forward often come from the most unlikely places. Get a mentor from another industry or another company... seek the counsel of the wise elders in your profession; standing on the shoulders of a giant helps you to see a lot further. Developmental relationships can be found in many places – being part of Institute committees and learning from the shared wisdom of the group; offering to be a mentor for the Institute's various mentoring initiatives.

CONSIDER BEING A MENTOR

Becoming a mentor can also be a powerful development opportunity. I have found that I learn an enormous amount from people



I mentor. Their unique perspective on a situation and exploration of ways forward stretches my own view and challenges me in my own work. In an organisational setting, mentoring others can help you to get more connected in to what's happening across the organisation and to provide a sense of contribution as well as an appreciation of what the young uns have to offer.

DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

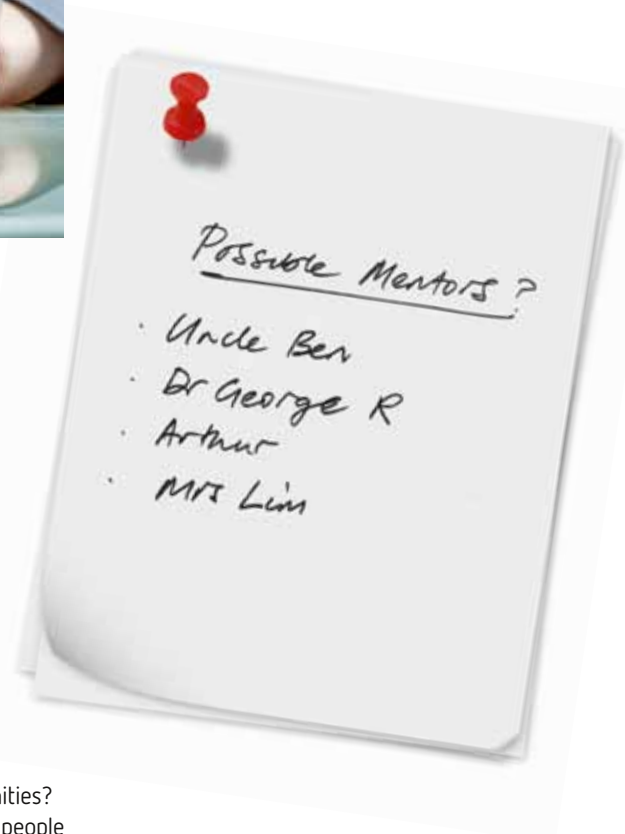
Another fantastic way to learn and grow is through embracing the learning from difficult relationships. If you are anything like me in my more vulnerable moments, your first movement in these situations may be like a game of poison ball; running, ducking, anything to avoid the ball. Yet when I have run out of places to hide, or figured out that I was part of the problem, I have found I learn a lot more from people I disagree with and have a different perspective to, than people who are simply like me. And when you turn around a difficult relationship, very often those people can become your greatest career advocates.

Not only can you learn and grow through developmental relationships, you also have a tremendous opportunity to support others to develop and grow their leadership capability. Sometimes, just having faith in others can make a real difference to them, as it did with

my conversation at the lift. The term 'Pygmalion effect' is some times used to describe how having such a strong belief in another person's capabilities, becomes a catalyst for the person to live up to those capabilities. It comes from the Greek myth about the sculptor, Pygmalion, who sculpted a statue of a woman of such beauty that he fell in love with her. Because of his devotion, the goddess of love shot an arrow into the statue which turned it into a real woman wh Pygmalion then married.

What are your Pygmalion opportunities? It could be with your family members, people in your team, or the despondent figure at the lift well pondering their next career move. Embracing developmental relationships provides richness and growth beyond the boundaries of a model or spreadsheet; in many ways it is a calling for us to develop beyond what we can achieve by ourselves. I look forward to hearing other ways that people have profited through developmental relationships.

Next months column will focus on developing leadership through adverse situations. **A**



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